

# The Four Pillars of Good Writing

Which hard skill do recent college grads lack the most? In 2016, PayScale.com asked employers this question. The top response was “writing proficiency.”

Wow. Our education system teaches few practical skills, but it does emphasize writing. So what gives? Incompetent teachers? Unteachable students?

Actually, the problem for many college graduates is having absorbed their academic training all too well. The challenge for them is to unlearn the bad writing habits picked up from 16-plus years of school.

Doing so takes the right approach, but it also takes work. An article can't teach you good writing. At best, it can teach you how to teach yourself to write well. So, I won't offer much style advice. Instead, I'll explain the mentalities and practices that are most fundamental for becoming a good writer, and that are also most missing among young writers, as I've found as an editor and writing coach.

## 1. Give Your Readers a Good Experience

As a student writer, your job was to perform according to specifications. A successful essay was one that jumped through the right hoops as defined by the assignment requirements and grading rubrics. It also demonstrated that you had done the reading and attended the lectures.

But as a real-world writer, you're now in the experience business. Your job is to show your readers a good time: to intrigue and inspire, to enlighten and engross, to please and provoke. You're a dealer in fascinating ideas and satisfying arguments, a purveyor of a-ha moments and epiphanies.

Now you're writing for readers, not graders. Real-world

audiences are looking for a good experience, not a “correct” performance.

## **2. Read More, Especially Stuff You Love**

But to offer a good experience, you must be able to recognize one. Every good chef is to some extent a connoisseur. Similarly, to be a good writer, you need to be a discriminating reader. To produce quality writing, you must be able to appreciate it when you read it and to distinguish it from mediocre or poor writing.

How does one become a connoisseur of food? Through practice: eating a lot of dishes, especially delicious ones. How does one become a connoisseur of words? Again, through practice: reading a lot of books and articles, especially ones you love. To be a good writer, you need to be an avid reader.

College students read a lot. Why doesn't that make them good writers? The problem here is that it is mostly compulsory. There is no space to seek and discover what kind of reading experiences you love if all your reading time is taken up with stuff you are assigned. You cannot make someone a connoisseur by force-feeding them.

Your reading diet needs to be voluntary if it is going to help you figure out the kind of writing you love. Find a topic you are curious about, look for some well-reviewed titles on Amazon, and dive in.

I myself only blossomed as a writer after I rediscovered my long-lost love of reading. And that only happened after I graduated from college and was no longer tied down to a syllabus.

My first post-grad reading love affair was with books about history. I became obsessed with learning the story of human civilization, from ancient Mesopotamia to the present. Through pursuing this passion, I developed a discriminating taste for history writing.

Later, I started writing historical vignettes of my own. These were published on a major website and garnered admiring comments from readers. This was my debut as a published writer.

It was only after being able to recognize excellent history writing that I was able to produce it myself.

### **3. Edit Until You Enjoy It**

In your first draft, when you are initially hammering out your sentences, good taste will be of some help. But where it really makes a difference is in self-editing.

Be picky with your own prose. Demand quality. Now that you know what you like, go back and edit your own writing until you enjoy reading it: ideally until you love it.

Rearrange sections to ensure a logical flow. Reword awkward phrases. Add creative flourishes, like a vivid metaphor or a delightful turn of phrase. Make the wording musical to your mind's ear. Tweak and fine-tune. Take as many editing passes as needed to carve the piece into something you're proud of.

Above all, prune. If you've recently graduated from college, your writing is probably way too wordy. Minimum word counts have trained you to pad your prose.

Here's a worthwhile exercise: next time you write something, try cutting its word count in half. Comb through every passage and ruthlessly delete anything that doesn't clearly contribute value to the piece.

Is that paragraph a digression? Remove it. Would your meaning be clear without that adverb? Zap it. All that verbal foliage will only drag the reading experience down. Once you trim it away, your piece will be much more brisk and enjoyable.

### **4. Actually Write**

No amount of tips and tricks will make you a good writer. It is not a matter of adopting the right formula or following an expert's dos and don'ts. Ultimately, it's up to you to teach

yourself how to write well through experience and self-evaluation. Most best practices can only be learned through actual practice.

And as with any form of training, you have to get your reps in. The more frequently you write, the faster you'll improve as a writer. Start a blog with Medium.com or WordPress.com. Challenge yourself to write and click publish every day for a month.

Share your posts on social media. Occasionally review your older posts and notice how your writing has evolved. Identify flaws that seem to be persisting or virtues that seem to be missing. Push yourself to improve every week. If you do that for a month, you are certain to be a much better writer than when you began.

Why not start today?

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